

### Psychoanalysing Theresa: Telling It Slant in Alice McDermott's Child of My Heart

Corso, Gail

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Corso, G. (2017). Psychoanalysing Theresa: Telling It Slant in Alice McDermott's Child of My Heart. *Studies in Arts and Humanities*, 3(1), 20-33. <https://doi.org/10.18193/sah.v3i1.88>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

## Psychoanalysing Theresa: Telling It Slant in Alice McDermott's *Child of My Heart*

Gail Corso

Department of English, Neumann University  
Aston, United States

© Gail Corso. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

### Abstract

*Psychoanalytic theory, as explained by Esther Rashkin, combines with literary analysis to understand the driving force that motivates a character to tell a story. Such is the case for understanding the first-person narrator in the fictive memoir, Alice McDermott's novel, 'Child of My Heart'. By analysing symbolism, descriptive details, and dialogue, the reader recognises a conflicted identity of the 15-year-old protagonist Theresa - as told by her more mature self about her coming of age that summer in the early 1960s. Theresa reminisces about love, loss and death. Through the examination of what is said and what remains unstated - by use of psychoanalytic theory - the character's motivating force to tell her story is intimated. Her phantom, or a secret in her family history, is considered through close analysis of words and symbols. Through cryptonymy, select words, symbolic acts and images are examined to identify her phantom. This phantom impels Theresa to tell her story with lies, including lies of omission, understatements, and silences; symbolic acts also point to her psychological needs. Significant questions surface about events from that summer in the 1960s to the time when the adult narrator - for her imagined reader - reminisces about her adolescent conflicted identity. Hints of a major family secret, too shameful to be expressed explicitly, when identified by the reader, sheds light on the character's grief and loss.*

**Keywords:** McDermott, Alice, 1953; Psychoanalysis; Cryptonymy; Family history (Sociology); Age, Coming of; Rashkin, Esther, 1951; Family secrets--Fiction

'Tell all the truth but tell it slant' (1263)  
Emily Dickinson

Tell all the truth but tell it slant-  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind-

## Introduction

In Alice McDermott's novel, *Child of My Heart*, the narrator Theresa describes the events of one summer in the early 1960s during which she cares for the children and pets of the neighbours in her East Hampton beach community. In her retrospective, Theresa presents herself as the tender teenager who charms children that otherwise would be disregarded. The parents of these children either unquestioningly trust her or remain oblivious to her nurturing role as a mother's helper. For several weeks, Theresa also tends to her visiting eight-year old cousin, Daisy Mae, who becomes ill while under Theresa's care; however, she does not receive proper treatment. With Theresa's silence, the reader becomes anxious about Theresa's seemingly trustworthy character, contrasting her constricted behaviour in her hesitance to seek appropriate help for Daisy. While incidents in the narrative end in August, Theresa confirms that Daisy "left us" the following March.

In effect, two storylines exist in Theresa's memoir: the onset and progression of Daisy's illness, as well as the critique of her ethnic roots and her movement away from home. The plot, bucolic at first, turns sinister when Theresa's own unaddressed psychological needs finally warrant attention. It becomes important in the analysis of this character to identify "[her] mental disequilibrium."<sup>1</sup> Esther Rashkin contributes psychoanalytic theory to understand characters in literature by identifying, when relevant, two previously unrecognised rhetorical modes—that of hiding and of concealment, as evidenced in the details and language choices of a character. Without examining language and components more closely - through connecting otherwise disconnected details in the storyline - meaning has been "undermined or deferred."<sup>2</sup> Through this method of analysis though, psychoanalysis converges with literary analysis to understand Theresa's motive in telling the story at all. In relation to the progression of Daisy's illness - following a dog bite to her foot - an adult neighbour demands that Daisy receive medical attention for her open wound. By this point in the trajectory of Theresa's other storyline, she has portrayed her parents' friends and relatives as aloof and locked into their Irish-American genteel and staid values and beliefs. Whereas, Theresa has aligned with the Artist, sought understanding from the Doctor, and rejected the dreams that her parents had for her future. In her silences about events following the summer of her fifteenth year, the reader surmises about her purpose in telling this tale, and suspects that Theresa has attempted to "tell all the truth," but she "tell[s] it slant."<sup>3</sup>

Theresa reveals her identity as an outsider, not just in the absence of friends, but in her desire to leave her home for that of an older man, the bohemian Artist. Through this desire, she chronicles her growing identity crisis and retreats from reality to an imaginative world that blends with lies "to scribble out the world since it was not to [her] liking."<sup>4</sup> The reader can assume that, after incidents in the story, Theresa aligns with the youth rebellion of the 1960s in the United States. Her pronounced silence following events of this summer suggests an even more shameful incident may have occurred beyond the boundaries of the novel: the possible birth of an illegitimate child.

To support this interpretation, a careful examination of the frames that the narrator uses to begin and to end her story reveals insights into the narrative. What emerges are symbols of birth, perceived neglect on the part of the mother, the intervention of another in

<sup>1</sup> Esther Rashkin, *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1992, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>3</sup> Emily Dickinson, "Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant," *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, Edited by R. W. Franklin, (MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard College, 1983), p.1263.

<sup>4</sup> McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 134.

usurping the role of the mother, and possible sorrow and grief as consequences of romantic acts that defy reality. The novel begins and ends with the image of three wild baby rabbits that Theresa removes from their nest to nurture as a gift for the neighbour's neglected children. This symbolic frame for the memoir-like novel signals to the reader Theresa's conflicted sense of self—the caring, nurturing teenager in conflict with the self-absorbed, fantasy-charged, and defiant teenager, who disregards her parents' cautionary advice, and takes matters into her own hands despite consequences for others. Through her seemingly charming act, she shows how her usurping the role of the mother rabbit creates temporary joy for the children, but longer-term harm for them, the bunnies, and their dam. Her parents caution her, “Not meant to live.... Being wild things.”<sup>5</sup> In the novel's final scene in August, Theresa describes her action:

Without a word, I carried the box to the steps and bent down, and with the Moran kids gathered around me, I gently lifted the hopeless little things, still breathing, into the nest of the torn grass.<sup>6</sup>

Even the mature Theresa disregards the harm she inflicts on the mother rabbit, who will return home to an empty nest. Theresa, through her intervention, has acted negligently. For Theresa, this act captures her belief in romantic tragedy: “the inevitable, insufferable loss buried like a dark jewel at the heart of every act of love.”<sup>7</sup> The wild bunnies - to Theresa - symbolise the lives of these children, whose own mother avoids her maternal role. Flora's mother, too, absconds from her role, leaving baby Flora to the care of others, specifically to Theresa, the young babysitter. Theresa, then, plays the part of surrogate mother throughout the course of the novel. Her indulgence, usurping the mother rabbit's role, serves as a symbolic act in what appears to show a “concealed presence.”<sup>8</sup> Theresa describes many scenes of young ones being removed from their mothers, or mothers denying the presence of their children. The wildness of the bunnies, so too, reflects Theresa's own desires.

Through the framing of Theresa's act of negligent nurturance of those wild bunnies, the reader indirectly recognises the teenager's defiance of natural processes. Having been isolated from friends and family members of her age, and, indeed, distanced from her own parents, who leave her to her own divinations, Theresa creates her own world. Being absent long hours from the home nest, her parents provide materialistic goods for Theresa—a residence in the East Hamptons, a private Catholic high school education, and removal from life in urban New York. However, they fail to relate to their child in any meaningful way. Theresa's home life seems empty of true personal interaction with her parents. In one telling detail, she explains how, at breakfast one morning, they treated her “as if I am an unexpected guest.”<sup>9</sup> Beyond such absence of a healthy family life, this teenager carries with her a “phantom,” which Rashkin explains as “unspeakable family dramas”<sup>10</sup> that create some incoherences in the storyline. Through close analysis of details and symbols, especially as they relate to Theresa's removal of the bunnies from their mother, the reader can begin to understand Theresa's own “inevitable, insufferable loss buried like a dark jewel at the heart of every act of love.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>8</sup> Esther Rashkin, *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1992, 5.

<sup>9</sup> McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 242.

McDermott crafted a tale “written to trap us into initial misreadings designed to awaken us guilefully to what is really going on,” a kind of “somnambulism.”<sup>12</sup> Through interpreting symbols and specific language in the novel, the reader can sense Theresa's disassociation from her family. Perhaps a secret - the birth of an illegitimate child and its possible adoption - causes the Irish-American family greater shame, isolating her further. This narrative serves as a representation of the American dream gone awry. Theresa's parents aspire for their daughter to marry into wealth, but sadly, they thwart her development by neglecting to relate to her in supportive ways. The relationship between mother and daughter bespeaks a disconnect.

## Theresa's Phantom: Her Evasions about Daisy's Bruises

In applying a psychoanalytic interpretation of Theresa's prevarication, “cryptic traces of an unspeakable drama”<sup>13</sup> factor into understanding why she evades appropriate action. When applying Rashkin's theory to understand a character's motivation, the reader is required to recall details, dialogue, allusions, and certain actions to unveil or to complete the text since often a secret is encrypted in the narrative.<sup>14</sup> Such seems to be the case for Theresa. Her inaction may be symptomatic of her family history. As a second-generation Irish American, her not-too-distant ancestors in Ireland may have rebelled in 1916. This could explain her parents' deep silences and contentment living on the fringes of their East Hampton community, far removed from areas in New York City where their parents first emigrated to from Ireland, and also, far from their Irish roots. Theresa may feel that Daisy, despite her evidence of bruises and fever, is protected in this idyllic location.

Several scenes, however, reveal Theresa's growing awareness of Daisy's need for medical assistance, but she is nonetheless restrained in her response. Early in the novel after Petey Moran indicates that he likes Daisy, Theresa first reveals that bruises appear on one of Daisy's legs: “There was a shiny scar on her knee and a series of black and blue marks down her freckled calf.”<sup>15</sup> She dismisses what she sees and consoles Daisy with a fantasy that her shoes are getting pinker. Later in the narrative, Theresa notices an “unmistakable bruise... a black-and-blue crescent that reached nearly to her toes.”<sup>16</sup> When Theresa asks Daisy if her brothers caused it, she defensively responds, “I don't know how I got it... It was just there one day, a little while ago. I don't know why.”<sup>17</sup> When Theresa examines the bruise more closely, she sees that it is “a mottled bruise, yellowish in spots, in some spots almost black.”<sup>18</sup> Theresa then asks Daisy, “Did you tell anyone?... Did you show your mother?”<sup>19</sup> so she understands the problem's severity. Yet when Daisy explains that she fears being sent home because of these bruises, Theresa reflects:

All the things Aunt Peg and Uncle Jack, in their busy, child-infested lives, could have missed, could have been missing for quite some time. ‘Poor Daisy.’ ‘Poor Daisy,’ we all said.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Edward Hagan, “The American Wake: Alice McDermott, *Child of My Heart*.” *Goodbye Yeats and O'Neill: Farce in Contemporary Irish and Irish-American Narratives* (Amsterdam, NY: Rodopi, 2010), 191.

<sup>13</sup> Esther Rashkin, *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1992, 158.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 91

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 91-92.

Theresa reflects on what she observed at the time with commentary that she and her parents ('we') may have made of Daisy's mother and father—not of any failure of her own in responding to Daisy's needs. Again when Theresa and Daisy sleep in Theresa's favorite place, her house's attic, she recounts her awareness of another bruise, "a new one, on her shoulder, small and round, from Petey's fist."<sup>21</sup> Though she states that she and Daisy say no more about them, Theresa notes her awareness of Daisy's sprawling bruises: "I caught another glimpse of the bruise on her back and thought it seemed lighter today, the yellowish green of something on its way to healing."<sup>22</sup>

As a response to the child's needs, Theresa redirects attention to herself. Theresa distracts the children and anyone else on the beach one day when changing her bathing suit, "whoever might have been watching us among the half dozen or so groups scattered on the beach would have had a good bright white glimpse of whatever little bit I had."<sup>23</sup> Theresa evades addressing Daisy's need for medical assistance by calling attention to herself. This is reflected by Dr. Kaufman, who tells Theresa that she can swim anytime in his backyard pool. But even he cautions her about Daisy's needs: "She looks anemic... She may well be. You might want to mention it to her parents. A blood test might be a good idea. And sooner rather than later."<sup>24</sup> To Theresa's response that Daisy is "fine," Dr. Kaufman repeats, "But you should mention it to her parents."<sup>25</sup> Theresa's solution to Daisy's signs of visible illness is to retreat into fantasies and wish them away:

Draw a world where [death or loss] simply doesn't happen, a world of only color, no form.... all dark things banished, age, cruelty, pain, poor dogs, harried parents, lonely children, all the coming griefs, all the sentimental, maudlin tales fashioned out of the death of children.<sup>26</sup>

Later in the novel, Theresa and the Artist feed Daisy St. Joseph's aspirin for children to mask the problem. Theresa then notices yet another "spreading bruise" on the "inside of her [Daisy's] arm."<sup>27</sup> Not until Rags, the dog, bites Daisy's ankle does anyone intervene. Mrs. Richardson exclaims, "Terribly discolored... We're going to get you to a doctor... She should go straight to the emergency room."<sup>28</sup> In what follows, Daisy's parents ask Theresa if she had been noticing any of her other bruises, and they suggest that perhaps she "should have mentioned them to someone."<sup>29</sup> Theresa's defensive response to them shows her dismissal of her own culpability, and her jealousy that Daisy has siblings. She sarcastically blurs her cousin's family with that of the dysfunctional Moran neighbors, "I said I figured it was just the result of being raised with so many siblings."<sup>30</sup> With this strategic lie, she manipulates her parents' approval, as is evidenced by their response, "Like the Moran kids."<sup>31</sup> For her inattention to Daisy's physical problems, Theresa was absolved of guilt by her parents. As Daisy's bruises sprawl, Theresa's moral compass becomes more disoriented.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 239.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

## Cryptonymy in the Narrative: Interpreting Symbol Fragments in Teresa's Narrative

Theresa becomes skillful at imagining escapes from reality, and at judging the character of those around her through a biased measure of their care and concern for the needy. She portrays several characters as less caring—those she dislikes, including her parents, Mrs. Swanson, Daisy's sister, Bernadette, and her cousin's parents. To Theresa, these people follow rules of the establishment, and they judge others unfairly and harshly if they break from established boundaries. In these telling details, the mature Theresa disparages those constrained by lack of hope, by absence of humour, of imagination, and of any sense of freedom. Theresa's Uncle Jack, Daisy's father, is a transit police officer whom Theresa criticises as constrained by "a thousand and one inscrutable but insurmountable rules regarding his home and children."<sup>32</sup> Those in his home lead their lives by measures and rules.

She describes others less judgmentally. Dr. Kaufman and the Artist - each who comment on her beauty and take certain liberties with her in what they say and do - she presents with her approval. Theresa, perceived as "the village beauty,"<sup>33</sup> or "the wood nymph," who is "Irish,"<sup>34</sup> retreats from regulations by escaping into fantasies. She finds the Artist's home with his toddler daughter Flora as a haven where she feels free. She enjoys the Kaufman home where the Doctor, evidently divorced, introduces Theresa to his girlfriend, Jill.<sup>35</sup> When Theresa showers at the Artist's house after a day at the beach, she violates her mother's admonition. In her reminiscence, she admits, "...more and more I was coming to realise that Flora's house was the only place I really wanted to be."<sup>36</sup> Theresa desires to be part of this home where she can be open, where her creative self also feels understood, and where ongoing human drama unfolds. In her own home, while her parents appear civil to her, their communication is perfunctory as they withhold emotions. Theresa portrays them as an elderly couple, locked into staid propriety, regulated, too, by their dedication to work, and by genteel Irish mannerisms of their Irish-Catholic upbringing.<sup>37</sup>

Despite this limitation, Theresa's parents fulfil their responsibility as providers. Outside of their home, Theresa portrays another side to them where their prejudices surface when forced to interact with extended family members. At her Uncle Frank's funeral, she shows through select details her family's prejudice against social integration in American culture. When African-American visitors pay respect to her Uncle at his wake, she describes her family's intolerance in how they respond to Frank's respect for diversity. To her family, it becomes a joke riddled with criticism. This Irish form of ridicule, known as "slagging," is "deliberately hurtful" with the intent to "render the grand mundane."<sup>38</sup> Theresa's Uncle Frank had known many musicians and club owners in Harlem, but none of his family members understood such a liberating experience through music, or cared to understand his sense of tolerance and racial equality. Theresa tells how her father explains away Frank's respect for

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>37</sup> Maureen Dezell, *Irish America: Coming into Clover*, (NY: Books of Random House), 2002. In *Irish America: Coming into Clover* (2002), Maureen Dezell describes Irish "lace curtain" mannerisms that reflect "stifling forces of piety and propriety—key elements of middle-class, or lace curtain, life" (103). This mindset which prevailed among middle-class Irish Americans was "a hybrid of Victorian primness, Catholic Puritanism, and social insecurity" that they hoped distinguished them from the "poor, 'shanty Irish'" (103).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 136.

diversity: “But see... When Frank played music, everything else, for him, just vanished. He probably didn’t know what color anybody was.”<sup>39</sup> Theresa’s father equivocates rather than expressing the truth of the matter—that Theresa’s Uncle Frank enjoyed the company of his African-American friends. Theresa understands that her Uncle Frank had defied racism and had broken through boundaries imposed by her parents’ Irish-American social group. She reports how her family reminisced derisively about their shock and embarrassment by her uncle’s friends and colleagues.

Theresa, again, tells the story of how her family gossiped about one neighbour’s having inherited his house from his “fairy” uncle, showing the cruelty of her parents’ talk about Mr. Clarke’s fortune. They joke about the homosexual orientation of a neighbour’s relative, once again finding fault with anyone who differs from what they value as socially acceptable.<sup>40</sup> Through such digressions from the plot about Daisy’s increasingly more evident need for medical attention and Theresa’s persistent hesitancy in taking proper action, Theresa’s sense of social justice and her disregard for her parents and what they represent erupt into her narrative to show her evolving moral conscience. Her parents remain interested primarily in Theresa’s economically-stable future married into wealth, yet they seem oblivious to her growing moral conscience. As an adult, she portrays sinister profiles of them.

In contrast to such sharp portraits of her family’s prejudice, Theresa describes with sensitive and even poetic language those she cares about: Daisy, Flora, Red Rover, the Artist, the Moran children, and Petey. “You’re an old soul, Daisy,” she tenderly says as she consoles her.<sup>41</sup> About Petey Moran, the more mature Theresa confides how life would play out for him:

[He] would be plagued all his life by anger and affection, by gifts gone awry, by the irreconcilable difference between what he got and what he longed for- by the inevitable, insufferable loss buried like a dark jewel at the heart of every act of love.<sup>42</sup>

Through the stories of her interactions with these characters, Theresa shows her heightened sensitivity to serve those who are underserved, and through the tales of her family, her heightened awareness of their prejudices and exclusionary practices. Theresa documents her unconditional, positive regard for those on the fringes, having given time, nurturance, and understanding to those who were shadows in the community. What is left unstated about her loss - that moves outside of incidents in the plot - points to what she actually experienced as opposed to what she longed for, to what perhaps she “got” as opposed to what she “longed for”; she “got” her gift of a love child, perhaps separated from her at birth, just as the wild bunnies were separated by Theresa from their dam. Aside from the obvious death of Daisy, this other “insufferable loss” of her own child serves as the driving force of Theresa’s reminiscence. Early in the story, the Artist painted a small portrait of her—a token that even then had monetary value. To Theresa, though, it represented the Artist’s aesthetic: his vision, his craft, and his responsibility to value art. The reader, like Daisy, may see that this art portends brokenness, for as the innocent observes: “It’s a picture of something broken... Something you sort of expected to break, but you still wish it hadn’t. You still think maybe it won’t.”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 148.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 242.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 90.



## Theresa's Psychic and Family History: Silences

Theresa portrays contrasting images of families: those who have and those who have not. She provides a lens into the life of the East Hampton community as well as into her Irish-American, Catholic extended family with its traditional values and beliefs. She critiques the puritanical views, materialism, and the shallow values of "tweedy New Yorkers,"<sup>44</sup> as much as she condemns the tawdry sensuality of her next-door neighbour, Sondra, the Jayne Mansfield/Marilyn Monroe look alike<sup>45</sup> and the mother of the neglected Moran children. Theresa's parents live in what was once a fisherman's cottage on the margins of this upscale community. They are consumed by their jobs and their daily long commute to and from Riverhead, New York. They live their lives to provide for their daughter, yet they have little time, energy, or inclination to consider their daughter's emotional well-being and her development as a balanced teenager. Through this benign neglect, Theresa experiences loneliness and a sense of not quite belonging with them.

While the East Hampton setting conjures a sense of beauty, incidents in the narrative shatter this image and call into question the needs of the protagonist whose parents remain oblivious to her conflicts, indiscretions, and obsessions about love, loss, and death. In Theresa's memoir, she refers frequently to death: death of her older brother, Robert Emmet, as an infant; impending death of the three bunnies; death of Curly, the cat; death of her Uncle Frank; death of the little boy that the lollipop tree commemorates; and most significantly, death of Daisy. About each death, Theresa's mother maintains a deadening silence. Through other telling details, such as Theresa's unwittingly doing wrong by removing bunnies from their natural habitat and their mother rabbit, the reader recognises Theresa's own misguided actions. The symbolic act by which Theresa frames her memoir at beginning and end invites a psychoanalytic interpretation to understand that compelling force - a secret too shameful to express explicitly.

The genesis of the narrative resides in hidden family sagas.<sup>46</sup> Characters like Theresa often serve as "emissaries... whose words and actions can be heard to tell the secret history generating their existence."<sup>47</sup> Theresa reveals shadows of her younger self and her attempts to recolour the landscape for those whom she loved. Through two primary considerations—one of concern for those whom she perceives as helpless in her community, and one of growing rebellion against voices of authority, normative values and social injustices—the story's conflict unfolds. This tension in the narrative between these two aspects of Theresa's morality relates to the effects of an absence of authentic relationships between her and the adults in her life, wherein the adult responds to the adolescent's growing concerns or conflicts:

Psychological development in adolescence may well hinge on the adolescent's belief that her or his psyche is worth developing, and this belief in turn may hinge on the presence in a teenager's life of an adult who knows and cares about the teenager's psyche.<sup>48</sup>

Theresa lacks any such trusting relationship with a parent who nurtures her spirit. Scholars have written about the importance of such caring parent-child relationships. Even Alice

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Esther Rashkin, *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1992.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>48</sup> Carol Gilligan, "Prologue: Adolescent Development Reconsidered," *Mapping the Moral Domain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP), VII-XXXIX.

McDermott identifies this needed nurturance of children by a parent.<sup>49</sup> This nurturance is characterised as “the unconditional love these mothers and fathers feel for their children [that] is nothing less than a reflection of the Divine Love.”<sup>50</sup>

However, Theresa’s relationship with her mother is marked by pronounced silence; love of the mother for her child, as told by the now mature child, appears strongly muted.<sup>51</sup> If Theresa’s mother had formed an emotional connection with her, Theresa might have confided in her about Daisy’s bruises, about her growing differences in opinion about those in the community or those in their family, about her growing doubt in faith, about her wondering why men feel free to touch her, even about consequences of sexual acts. As the second child, she was born in the shadow of her parents’ first-born son, Robert Emmet, who died at birth. That her grandfather named the child shows Theresa’s parents’ disregard for the child who died. In his choice of Robert Emmet, Theresa’s grandfather reveals his Irish nationalism as the name symbolises “Irish-America’s most favorite martyr-hero.”<sup>52</sup> The child’s name refers to the Irish nationalist who in 1803 led an abortive rebellion against the British, and after he was captured, he was executed for high treason. Emmet is known as the romantic hero of Irish nationalism,<sup>53</sup> as well as “a romantic hero of Irish lost causes.”<sup>54</sup> In this family environment, as the sole child born after the male firstborn who died at birth, Theresa operates autonomously in his shadow. For vulnerable Theresa the Artist fills gaps in her nurturance, serving as her temporary surrogate familial tie.

## Theresa’s Prevarication: Strategic Lies, Lies of Omission, Sexual Awakening, and Creative Expression

Theresa’s parents avoid having any meaningful conversation with her about her thoughts and feelings. In the positive development of female sexuality, such parental communication to “understand, manage, and act on sexual desires” is critical.<sup>55</sup> In the narrative, Theresa emphasises her giving nature and her longing to love and to nurture. However, the reader does not know what happens to her after her fifteenth summer, as the age of the sexual revolution begins. The Civil Rights Movement, too, engages the nation at large. How does Theresa fit into society as a mature woman when she recounts that she rebelled from accepted moral codes as a younger woman, having experienced her first sexual encounter as a 15-year-old with a famous abstract-expressionist artist in his 70s? When she reflects upon her growing moral uncertainty and doubt about her family’s values and her own beliefs, she confesses at one point, that “No doubt, it was because I had begun to suspect that God and I,

<sup>49</sup> Alice McDermott, “Foreword.” In *Up All Night: Practical Wisdom from Mothers and Fathers*, edited by Gregory Orfalea and Barbara Rosewicz, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press), 2004, XI- XIV.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, XXXI.

<sup>51</sup> Monica McGoldrick, Nydia Garcia-Preto, Paulette Moore Hines, and Evelyn Lee in “Ethnicity and Women,” *Women in Families: A Framework for Family Therapy*, edited by Monica McGoldrick, Carol M. Anderson, and Froma Walsh, (NY: W.W. Norton & Company), 1991, 169 – 199. Researchers identify how in Irish and Irish-American families mothers “generally raise their daughters to follow in their footsteps- to take responsibility.... to raise their daughters more like sisters, not allowing them to be children” (173). This relationship, especially as it is depicted in *Child of My Heart* is skewed, as Theresa’s mother misunderstands her daughter, and denies her access to shared understandings, such as that between sisters. In their cottage, there is a pronounced benign silence.

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press), 1992, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Mac Annaidh, Séamas, *Irish History* (Bath, UK: Parragon), 2007, 148-149.

<sup>54</sup> Editors, “Robert Emmet: Irish Leader” (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.: *Encyclopedia Britannica*), November 5, 2009, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Emmet> (accessed February 9, 2017).

<sup>55</sup> Lisa M. Diamond, “Introduction: In Search of Good Sexual-development Pathways for Adolescent Girls,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 112: 1-7.

as Uncle Tommy would have put it, weren't seeing eye to eye."<sup>56</sup> Theresa expresses her own doubts about religion and moral values. In the absence of peer friendships and any substantial dialogue with adult women, Theresa intuitively finds her way as she rebels against the codes of her family's religious and cultural traditions. She copes by lying and fabricating tales.

Theresa reminds her reader of all the times in the story when she, during her fifteenth summer, conjured tales or fabricated lies. She encourages Daisy to lie about her home,<sup>57</sup> and Theresa lies to the Artist when she tells him that Ana told her to bring him his whiskey and juice.<sup>58</sup> She lies to suit the rhetorical situation: she fabricates lovely stories to soothe the children and to deflect their disturbances from harsh realities to flights of fancy, redirecting them emotionally from being depressed about their circumstances to being hopeful, as symbolised by the three rabbits born with the mystical caul.<sup>59</sup> Theresa consoles Flora by creating a comforting story in which the toddler's mother, upon seeing Flora in a large painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, hurriedly rushes to a taxi, and exclaims, "Oh, for heaven's sake, what in the world am I doing here? Take me home to my little girl."<sup>60</sup> Theresa also adapts the story of the lollipop tree,<sup>61</sup> and attributes magical powers to Daisy's pink shoes.<sup>62</sup> She tells mystical stories about life before birth,<sup>63</sup> tales about the fisherman who occasionally returns,<sup>64</sup> and the ship that never returns.<sup>65</sup> She also nurtures the dreams of her neighbour, Petey, in defiance of an unstated belief that pervades the novel: *those who live in hope, die in despair*.

In another act of defiance, Theresa obliquely describes her sexual act with the Artist, deluding herself into thinking that she becomes his muse.<sup>66</sup> This act, described as devoid of passion, is muted when compared to her description of the lollipop tree celebration. Theresa pronouncedly understates details of her first sexual encounter:

But all his movements were sure, and I trusted whatever design he followed out of his own head, relieved for just a few moments, of the need to follow any design of my own.<sup>67</sup>

Through encrypted language and symbols, Theresa deemphasises possible consequences even though she reports the presence of a "shadow passing as it will in a dream, unable to get in."<sup>68</sup> This "concealed presence," the phantom or shadow which remains outside of the narrative because it is too shameful to confess, hints at a possible pregnancy. Later in the story, Theresa identifies among the Artist's wife's scarves, a small square cut from the Artist's bed's tapestry with its "smear of dark color."<sup>69</sup> Theresa intimates that this scarf may be a token of her loss of virginity, saved like a religious relic, one that perhaps the housekeeper Ana uses as evidence against her to be given to the Artist's wife upon her return, or as a gift to Theresa's parents; it is yet another of the Artist's abstract portraits, a gift to Theresa's parents, possibly to be framed and hung on a wall in their living room.

<sup>56</sup> Alice McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 129.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11, 214-219.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 28-29.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 55-56.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 225-226.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 232.

Because Theresa minimally describes select incidents, the reader may almost gloss over this scene of her gratuitous sexual act. Its significance and the inevitable emotional fallout in her family, if and when they learn about it, remain muted. Theresa knew about the Artist's sexual musings with other women, and she had witnessed his behavior with the maid. She also had been introduced to his needs by the young male journalist who tells her about the Artist's voracious sexual appetite for young girls: "There's always got to be something young and lively... child bearing for dessert... It's the blood-of-a-virgin kind of thing, I guess."<sup>70</sup> Even this young news writer, assuming a familiarity with Theresa, touches her. Theresa speculates how this behavior is a kind of understood norm that men in her community exhibit, yet her parents seem oblivious to it.

Feminists identify how some women authors' works reveal more than what appears to be the theme with "surface designs [that] conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning."<sup>71</sup> Theresa shows tensions in her identity, in her moral growth, and in her discomfort in her own home. In the beach scene where Theresa teaches Daisy and Flora how to change from their summer clothes into their bathing suits, she creates a makeshift towel tent to assure modesty for the transformation. Theresa's gentle coaxing of the more prudent yet urban Daisy shows how she influences the children. When the towel accidentally drops, Theresa tries to minimise, or perhaps justify, what appears to be her exhibitionistic behavior. She comments on her "excessive" attempts to remain modest, but she shows that she knows how others on the beach would observe her nudity:

making myself as tall as I could, I pulled my right arm out of the suit, pulled the suit to my waist, straightened the fabric at my hips and over my stomach, and then, leisurely, drew the suit up again, one strap over my left arm, and one over my right.<sup>72</sup>

Theresa's word choice "leisurely" suggests her consciousness about her rebelling against any possible onlookers as she strips. Dr. Kaufman later reminds Theresa that she was violating codes for propriety, as he states, "A couple of Village Improvement Society matrons by me went apoplectic. If there'd been a cop nearby they'd have had you arrested."<sup>73</sup> He softens the criticism, however, by adding that she could sunbathe anytime in the privacy of his backyard by the pool. Through Kaufman's response, Theresa is reminded of her beautiful body as an object of attention.

Theresa ultimately pays a price for her summer of tiny acts of rebellion. McDermott acknowledges that the more mature Theresa indeed recalls this story of her fifteenth summer "as she is lying alone in bed."<sup>74</sup> McDermott elaborates on this detail, and calls her "poor Theresa." She emphasises that "Daisy is her ghost," and reminds us that Theresa tells Daisy that "ghosts only appear to people who sleep alone."<sup>75</sup> In one of the many stories that Theresa tells Daisy early in the novel, the lollipop tree urban legend becomes their first shared lie that they tell Bernadette, Daisy's older sister, as Theresa intends to make Bernadette envious. But the story, presented as reality, is a lie to which Theresa has secured Daisy's complicity. The lollipop tree symbolises how Theresa's imaginative powers provide a temporary palliative to any hardship, but it also shows Theresa's initially cruel intentions. Theresa also initiates her

<sup>70</sup> Alice McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 188.

<sup>71</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Excerpt from *Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship*. (1363). *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. by David H. Richter (Boston, MA: Bedford St. Martin's Press) 1998.

<sup>72</sup> McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 120.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Reilly, "An Interview with Alice McDermott," 565.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 565.

protégé, Daisy, into farcical storytelling to expose others' faults, and to mask pain.<sup>76</sup> Toward the end of the novel, Theresa explains the lollipop tree legend for Daisy and Flora. In the legend, an old couple, who lived nearby, had on their lawn a willow tree upon which lollipops would grow, one day each year for one hour between dusk and the emergence of the first star. For that one hour any child without a bag or luggage could gather as many lollipops as they could hold. This lollipop event, simultaneously sad and joyful, Theresa explains to the children, memorialises the life and loss of the elderly couple's son who had died at just that time on that day fifty years before.<sup>77</sup> This legend reiterates the love this elderly couple had for their deceased son and the joy they sustain in memorialising him by giving joy to other children. Unlike the spirit of Theresa's elderly parents, this couple in the legend brings joy to life even when they are saddest, and they serve as nurturers of others' children.

It is significant to note that the Lollipop celebration with the Artist, Flora, Daisy, and Theresa occurs before the seduction scene in the barn between the Artist and Theresa. For Theresa's orchestrated lollipop tree celebration, no child has died, yet death and loss loom in the narrative, as the Artist and Theresa know that Daisy's fever is ever present, and her wounds are sprawling. Another allusion to lollipop trees was present in the early 1960s. Burl Ives popularised the song 'Lollipop Tree',<sup>78</sup> about a trick the persona in the lyrics describes; it echoes part of the story that Theresa tells the children earlier in the novel. Without hearing the popular music, but with this childlike tale of happiness and hope as a backdrop, the Artist joins the children to celebrate. Unlike any other adults in this community, he crosses a boundary by breaking from work when he revels in the company of children at play. Not only does the Artist shatter the walls between children and adults as they play together, but as Theresa reminisces, he touches her: 'He moved his hand down my hip and over my bare thigh and held it there, only the slightest pressures on his fingertips.'<sup>79</sup> The Artist crosses a boundary, blending child's play with his sexual overture. Theresa indicates how she accepts his overtures on any terms, by which "I put my lips to the papery skin."<sup>80</sup> The more mature Theresa avoids tagging the Artist as a sexual predator, for she describes him lovingly. She explains earlier that she was reading a paperback in which her hopes for that summer were stated: "Send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die."<sup>81</sup> The object of her hopes and desires appears to have been tendered to her by the Artist, the only adult in the narrative who takes time from his busy life to play with the children and Theresa and, again, to share reciprocal notions about boundaries for sexual propriety. Theresa seems to become what the news reporter previously had explained to her as one of the Artist's muses, "child-bearing for dessert."<sup>82</sup>

Theresa's disclosure of events that occurred that summer shows her more mature understanding of "all the useless longings of all of us who get left behind."<sup>83</sup> McDermott

<sup>76</sup> Edward Hagan, "The American Wake: Alice McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, *Goodbye Yeats and O'Neill: Farce in Contemporary Irish and Irish-American Narratives*, (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi), 2010, 191-203. In this chapter Hagan analyzes numerous examples of farce throughout this novel- the absurd beliefs of Theresa's parents, and McDermott's technique of "telling us that contemporary life is so farcical that it takes very witting farce to unmask the farce" (191).

<sup>77</sup> McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 10-11.

<sup>78</sup> Burl Ives, Lollipop Tree: What a Place To Be, Retrieved

[http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/b/burl\\_ives/the\\_lollipop\\_tree.html](http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/b/burl_ives/the_lollipop_tree.html) Retrieved 5 February 2016.

<sup>79</sup> McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 218.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 35. "Deliver my heart from this fearful, lonely place. Send me a great love from somewhere or else I shall die, truly I shall die." Are lines from Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* which in its fuller rendering reveals the teenager's longing for love and understanding.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 56.

gives us an Irish-American expression, 'Child of My Heart' or 'Grá mó croi,' to tell in loving terms the relationship of an older person with a younger person in sympatico—the Artist and Theresa, Theresa and Daisy, the more mature Theresa and her younger self, and, concealed in the novel yet outside the limits of the text, Theresa and her gift gone awry—her lost love child. Upon the telling of her coming of age, “truth dazzles gradually”<sup>84</sup> to secure understanding and forgiveness for the child Theresa once was.

## References

- Dezell, Maureen. 2002. *Irish America: Coming into Clover*. NY: Books of Random House.
- Diamond, Lisa M. 2006. “Introduction: In Search of Good Sexual-development Pathways for Adolescent Girls.” In *New Directions for Child & Adolescent Development 112*: 1-7. doi: 10.1002/cd.158
- Dickinson, Emily. 1951. “Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant.” 1129. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, Edited by R. W. Franklin. (MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard College, 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983).
- Encyclopedia Britannica* Online. November 5, 2009. “Robert Emmet,” by Editors, accessed February 9, 2017, <https://www.brittanica.com/biography/Robert-Emmet>
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Guber. 1998. From *Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship*. In *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, edited by David H. Richter, 1360-1374. NY: Bedford/St. Martin's Press.
- Gilligan, Carol. 1988. “Prologue: Adolescent Development Reconsidered.” In *Mapping the Moral Domain*, VII – XXXIX. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Hagan, Edward. 2010. “The American Wake: Alice McDermott, *Child of My Heart*. In *Goodbye Yeats and O'Neill: Farce in Contemporary Irish and Irish-American Narratives*, 191-203. Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi.
- Ives, Burl. Lollipop Tree: What a Place To Be. [http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/b/burl\\_ives/the\\_lollipop\\_tree.html](http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/b/burl_ives/the_lollipop_tree.html). Retrieved 5 February 2016.
- Mac Annaidh, Séamas. 2007. *Irish History*. Bath, UK: Parragon.
- McCaffrey, Lawrence J. 1992. *Textures of Irish America*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- McDermott, Alice. 2002. *Child of My Heart*. NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- . 2004. “Foreword.” In *Up All Night: Practical Wisdom from Mothers and Fathers*, edited by Gregory Orfalea and Barbarba Rosewicz. XI- XIV. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- McGoldrick, Monica, Nydia Garcia-Preto, Paulette Moore Hines, and Evelyn Lee. 1991. “Ethnicity and Women.” In *Women in Families: A Framework for Family Therapy*, edited by Monica McGoldrick, Carol M. Anderson, and Froma Walsh, 169-99. NY: Norton.

<sup>84</sup> Emily Dickinson, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” 1129, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, Edited by R. W. Franklin. (MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard College, 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983).

- Rashkin, Esther. 1992. *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Reilly, Charlie. 2005. "An Interview with Alice McDermott." *Contemporary Literature*, XLVI (4), 557-578. (Original interview on February 4, 2004)